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ABSTRACT

Personal narrative writing can be encouraged and used effectively in classes and in in-service workshops because it is accessible, because the writers may use their own voices, because they can tell their own stories, and because it helps them to make sense of their own experiences. However strong the case made for this form, though, there are always those who believe that personal essays do not prepare students for the rigors of argumentative writing. Although some students do have trouble making the transition between the two types of writing, these types are similar in many respects and with the right coaching the transition can be made. Personal writing is helpful to students because it moves them beyond many of their perceptions about school writing: namely, that is must fit a prescribed formula; that it involves no real inquiry or personal interest; that it is a pure form, containing none of what is found in personal writing. To challenge these assumptions, a writing course should be based on a number of carefully structured personal essay assignments. Students learn that argument is in fact a strong element in most personal essays; and conversely, that personal interest and experience are strong elements in argumentative writing. Educators must create classroom conditions that teach students to make sense of their own experiences that offer them strategies for discovering their own ideas, subjects, and structures. (Handouts contain cartoons and information about writing.) (TB)

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Expanding Their Repertoire: The Role of Personal Writing in Developing School-Sponsored Essays

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Michael Steinberg, Michigan State University.

I want to begin with a quote from James Britton:

Personal writing is a very important way of relating even the most academic syllabus to the life of the student and to the student's learning process. If you can tap that kind of intention--the intention to make sense of experience--if you can set up an environment where writing at the point of utterance is valued, then I think we're on to the kind of teaching and learning in schools that may look very different from an academic curriculum and much more like a modeling process

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Throughout this talk, I'll refer to "personal writing" in two contexts: as what Britton calls expressive or discovery writing and as the personal essay or personal narrative--how I use it will depend on the context

In all my writing classes and in my in-service workshops, I encourage personal narrative writing. I encourage it because personal narratives are accessible, because you can use your own voice and language, because you get to tell your own stories, and as Britton says, because personal writing helps students "make sense of experience." But when I present this view, no matter how strong a case I make there are always educators in the crowd who say that his/.her students can "write that personal stuff ok, but when it comes to producing the kind of academic writing that requires real critical thought and logical argument, they can't organize their thoughts, or focus their ideas, or come up with a clear thesis statement."

Those who oppose using personal writing in the classroom also argue that you can't test it and that it doesn't help students to master subject matter. That's a dangerous and misleading view of writing; and by now we ought to know better. But unfortunately at the level I teach and very often from middle school on up. that's still the dominant mode of thinking in education. And as a result of that attitude, many teachers who do endorse personal writing feel pressured to move their students as quickly as possible from the personal to what colleagues call the more "legitimate" academic forms: namely, exposition, argument, and critical analysis. In those respects, we treat personal writing as if the genre were some kind of debilitating disease that students who hang around it too long are likely to catch. That's the issue we want to address in this session.

Let's listen for a moment to what Janet Emig tells us about personal writing,

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At all ages the opportunity to write personally infuses our essays so there's a lovely interplay. I know that some teachers feel uncomfortable starting with personal writing for fear that something else will develop. But as teachers we're always focusing on the emerging text, or at least we should be. not on the person. It's the expression of a person that finds its way into a text. And that makes it a different kind of endeavor.

It goes without saying that the four of us agree with Emig and Britton-- but I also have to admit that my colleagues are right: our students--from middle school on up--do have problems expanding their repertoire from personal and expressive writing to what Britton calls transactional or public writing--what we call school writing. I want to talk about why I think that happens and how we as teachers can link personal writing with school sponsored forms. There are, I think, several reasons why our students have those problems.

One reason why my students have difficulties writing in school-sponsored forms is is that they are so used to thinking of school writing as a prescribed formula: the five-paragraph essay with a thesis statement and four paragraphs of support, the book report, the literary/critical essay-- (see transparencies 1 and 2) that they get in the habit of writing what Ken McCrorie calls "Engfish" (transparency 3)

And it' s no wonder. When we prescribe those genres we are often asking students to write on assigned topics that they know little about--in forms or genres that are largely unfamiliar to them.

Another reason that student's school writing is often vague and uninspired--to us as well as to them--is that in school they are not given nearly enough time and opportunity to discover their ideas, or to write expressively. As Britton's colleague Anthony Adams, explains:

In making sense of new information, the expressive is fundamental for learners of any age. When I am trying to cope with concepts that are new to me, I have to explain them, come to terms with them by talking (writing) about them in my own personal language, before I am able to cope with them in the language of the lecture hall, textbook, or any other public discourse for communication. I think one of the reasons why students find it very difficult to cope with new ideas is that the teacher isn't mediating those ideas to students nearly enough in the language in which they are most at ease. We expect students to operate in technical language before they have acquired the concrete experience which makes the technical language and concepts that underlie them accessible to them.

We know that expressive writing is a way of using our own language and voice to help us discover our ideas and thoughts on a given subject or topic. It's thinking out loud on the page--it's where we make mental notes to ourselves, gather information,

speculate, inquire, reflect, analyze, synthesize information, ask questions, and so on Our discovery writing forms the raw material that we eventually shape into whatever discourse form we are being asked to write in--from the personal narrative to an analytical essay on "Beowulf." No matter what the genre is, writers first must go through a discovery phase. Then through drafting, revising, feedback, and editing, we shape our ideas for an audience. That process is the same for writing narrative as it is for writing argument, exposition, analysis--or for preparing a talk such as this. Before I wrote this speech in the formal language it's now in, I wrote in my own voice, almost as a stream of consciousness internal monologue. Once I had the raw material down in my own voice and once I'd discovered my ideas, I began revising and shaping, changing the language and structure to shape it into a formal talk for this particular audience. Then I edited. In the end, I spent far more time in the discovery--or personal--stage of the composing than in the shaping stage. Our students need that time and opportunity in the writing classroom.

Another problem is that young writers are often taught that school or academic form of writing like exposition, argument, and analysis are self-contained or "pure" genres--that in a personal narrative, you simply tell a story, in an argument, you only make your point and develop it with supporting examples; in exposition, you pick a topic or subject, make a point and then support it with information, and so on. But that's a misrepresentation of what really happens when we write--in any form from personal to analytical, Let's make it really simple and say for example your students have to write a theme on that old saw "my summer vacation." As the piece evolves, the writer may find that he/she has occasion to give the reader information about say, Cape Cod. The writer may even have to use sources--formal or informal--guidebooks, maps, travel literature, etc. He/she might also find they're arguing a point--Cape Cod is a great (or lousy) place to vacation-- and that the writer will need to use supporting examples and/or details--like how it felt to take the whaling boat at Provincetown and how beautiful the beaches were, etc. At the same time writers may also be discovering an appropriate tone, perspective, or point of view from which to tell the story--will this piece be chatty and informal or more of a report or travelogue.?

This leads to my next point which is, that we misrepresent school writing when we say that there is a hierarchy that begins with the personal or expressive and builds to the analytical. Instead of a hierarchy, we need to see these genres as a continuum--what Janet Emig referred to earlier as "a lovely interplay." There's no reason why good argumentative writing cannot use narrative or story for its support, that personal

reflection cannot us exposition or critical analysis--and so on

As Stephen Tchudi tells us in his essay, "Literature and Reading as Liberal Arts," "Students who can write in diverse forms of discourse are better equipped to meet the demands of college and the 'real world' than those who have had a bland and steady diet of expository writing."

With that as a context, let me quickly illustrate how I teach personal narrative to middle-school, high school, and college students--first as a way of discovering and making sense of experience and also as a way of expanding my students' repertoire from personal or expressive writing to other school-sponsored forms--in this case, argumentation--because it's what my department wants us to teach in the second term of our developmental writing course.

I begin every writing course I teach with personal narrative: it's a form we're all familiar with and it helps us access what we think, feel, and know. First we get together in groups and make lists of what we think the qualities of good writing are. Then I show them Don Murray's list--(overhead 4) which Ruth Nathan abstracted from Writing to Learn. My students didn't use the same terminology, but they basically come up with the same qualities. (handout or transparency 4)

What I want to emphasize here is what Murray says in the last line about these qualities being the same for all writing--non-fiction as well as poetry, etc. Keeping that idea in mind, we began our first "unit, "the sense of self." To start off we read and respond to a series of personal narratives. "Shame" by Dick Gregory is about a young black boy who is publicly humiliated by a teacher and who spends a good part of his life overcoming that humiliation; "Salvation" by Langston Hughes dramatizes an incident in church where the 12 year-old Hughes has to decide either to lie and say he saw God or confess that he did not; Jean Shepard's "The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night and the Tinfoil Noose" is about a teen-aged boy who reluctantly agrees to go out on a blind date only to discover that he's the blind date; Nora Ephron's "A Few Words About Breasts" is about the author's struggles to overcome the childhood insecurity she feels because she believes her breasts were too small; "I'm Listening as Hard as I Can" by Terry Galloway is the story of a deaf girl who had to learn to accept her handicap before she could move on with her life; finally, "The Car," by Harry Crews is about the author's obsession with his car and how in his mid-twenties he grew away from that obsession.

In each one of these narratives, the writer learns how to overcome or come to terms

with something that is standing in the way of his/her growth. I deliberately chose these essays because in one way or another they all made a clear point--each of these authors learned something about themselves through a loss, decision, encounter, or conflict.

Each time we discussed one of these essays we talked about and wrote journal entries--free writes on how the writer made his/her point. For example, Dick Gregory's point was explicit and came at the beginning of his essay: Langston Hughes' and Nora Ephron made theirs implicitly all through their pieces; Jean Shepard's point came at the end of his narrative, and so on. We also discussed how the writers supported their main ideas with examples and illustrations, we talked about the different ways they organized their essays; and we speculated as to how those writers found the appropriate voice for their pieces.

Along the way, we also did some other kinds of informal (expressive) writing--response journals, other free writes, personal reflections, letters, imagined interviews, dialogues, poems, advertisements, and so on. I designed these activities to help students begin to make connections between their own experience and what they were reading. I also hoped that they'd discover some possible topics and ideas they could develop in writing their own personal narratives..

When it came time to write our own pieces, I encouraged students to choose any topic about growing up they wished to pursue, but there was one condition: they had to show how this incident, person, encounter, situation, tragedy, etc changed them or their outlook on life in some fundamental way. By asking them to focus on that idea, I was nudging them toward developing a main point.

We work shopped the piece for two weeks. First, I handed out some prompts and interest inventories (overheads 5, 6. 7) and I modeled how to brainstorm and discover ideas; then we did our own brainstorming and shared not only our developing texts but also our methods of discovering our ideas. We then wrote, shared and discussed our rough drafts, gave, group and individual feedback, worked on revisions, and finally proofreading, editing, and polishing (I wish I had more time to share with you the variety of workshop strategies I used, but that's another talk for another time). What I want to emphasize is that we immersed ourselves in the genre--we read personal narratives, modeled and discussed every phase of our own writing process from discovery to final draft. In doing this, we all saw how the different ways that writers discover ideas and voice, find examples, play with different structures, and so on..

As the pieces developed, I used student examples and examples from my own

writing to teach a series of mini-lessons where I presented a variety of strategies to show them how to discover and develop a main point or idea; how to use supporting examples, illustrations, details, descriptions, etc; as well as strategies for organizing, focusing, and developing narratives; for writing good leads and endings; and finding an appropriate voice for the emerging piece (perhaps example of lead hunt here--if time).

Once students had gone through this process on a few personal narratives--that is writing in a form that is familiar to them on topics they know something about, I felt that they were well-prepared and ready to expand their repertoire to include argumentative, expository, and critical pieces. As a matter of fact--just as I had expected, many of their personal narratives already included elements of argumentative, expository, and critical analytical writing. (examples if time)

When we wrote our first argumentative piece--an editorial--we read and discussed editorials of all kinds. In seeing other editorials students soon realized that not all editorials are third-person objective views--some writers use first person narrative as well. In the beginning stages, we wrote journal entries, and letters on personal concerns to the editor of the local and school papers--and then we began our own pieces. We started with our personal opinions; and we wrote our rough drafts in the first-person. Then as we gathered our sources and discovered our ideas, some students found it more appropriate to shift over to third person., some began developing arguments that were different from their original ideas. As a way of gathering information, some began interviewing local politicians, teachers, civic leaders, athletes, and visiting celebrities.

As the pieces developed, we all found that the problems we had to solve in this form were substantially the same as those we had to solve in our personal narratives: we had to find a strong point to argue, support the point with examples and sources, find an interesting way to structure and focus the point and argument, and come up with an appropriate tone.
(Murray's List, overhead 4)

I'm not claiming that my students all wrote brilliant arguments, but I do know that by the end of the term, they were more confident, competent writers and crafters of writing--they they could write more comfortably and authoritatively in a variety of genres. What's more, because they had the opportunity to compose a few focused personal narratives, the best arguments--and their subsequent expository and critical pieces---

blended personal reflections and narrative with more formal sources of support. (Emig's "lovely interplay" idea). As a result, their writing in all genres was more authentic and imaginative, more lively, and original. (If I had more time, I'd show examples)

In closing, if we want our students to become more insightful thinkers and more fluent writers in all academic and public genres, they need to experience composing and writing from the inside-out. What that means for us is that we need to create classroom conditions that encourage and teach students to use their writing first as a way of making sense of experience; conditions that offer them strategies for discovering their own ideas, subjects, and structures; and conditions that will allow them to compose in a variety of different forms--personal and imaginative as well as formal and academic. In short, we need to give them opportunities to compose the way real writers compose--but that's another talk for another time.

#

HAVE YOU GOT MY HOMEWORK, SKYLER?
JUST A BOOK REPORT.
BY MACHERY
ON TWO BOOKS I HAVEN'T READ
Write a 200-word book report comparing the themes of Tom Sawyer and Treasure Island.
Comparing the themes of Treasure Island, which is Robert Louis Stevenson's most famous work of fiction, and the theme of the novel Tom Sawyer, by the beloved and very well-known American author and writer, Samuel Clemens ...
(otherwise known by his non de plume, or pen-name, Mark Twain) is a very hard and difficult job indeed and requires a lot of careful study.
The first thing that one must do when one is asked to compare the theme of Tom Sawyer to the theme of Treasure Island is to find out where the two books are the same, if they are.
But also, however, be that as it may, we feel remains that while we want to find the points where the two books are the same when we compare the two themes, we want to also find out if we can, where the two books are different - if indeed they are different at all.
In fact, such a question as comparing the themes of Treasure Island and Tom Sawyer is so difficult and complex a question that it certainly can't be properly discussed in a book report of only two hundred words of which this is the two-hundredth.

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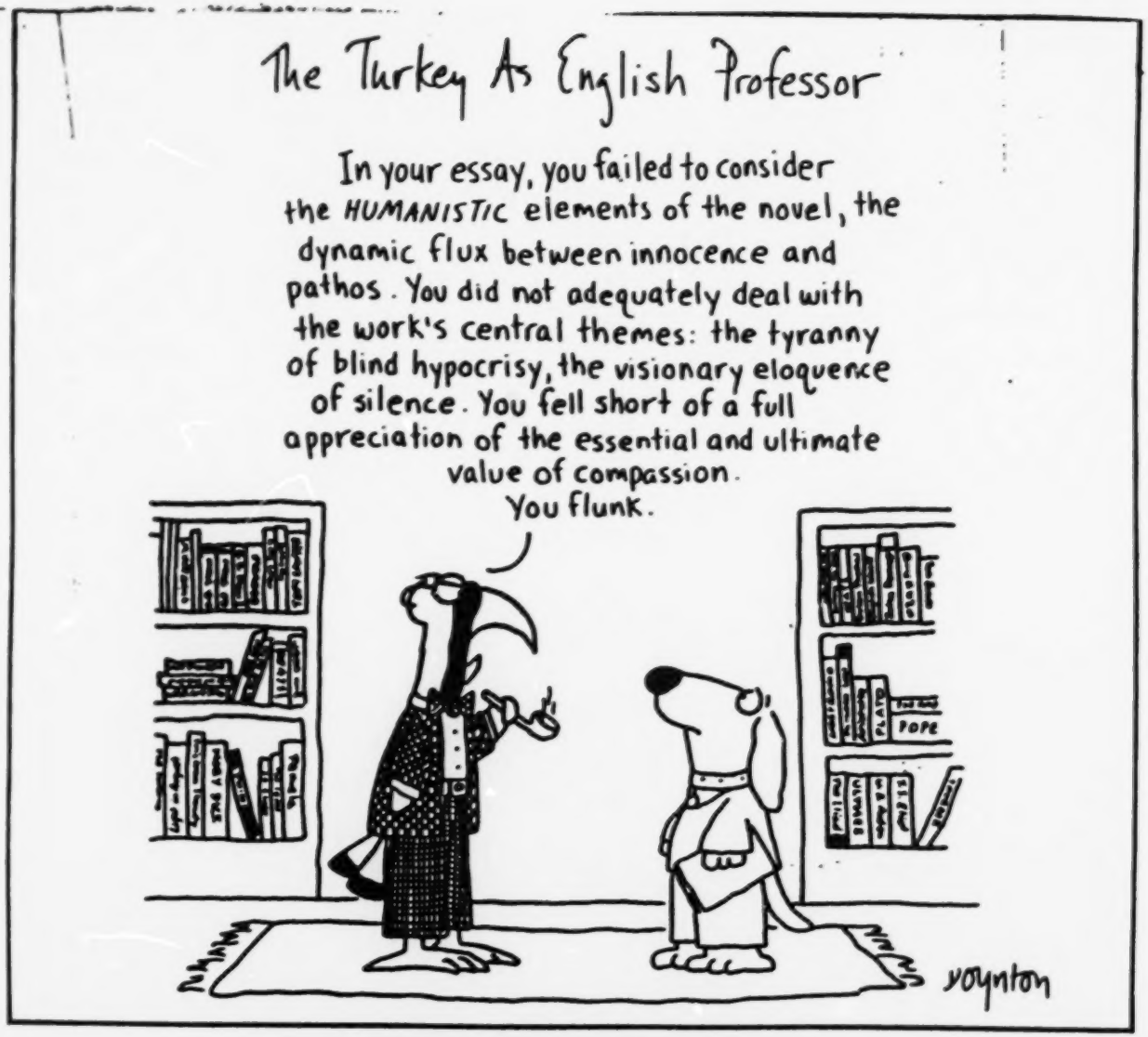
The Turkey As English Professor
In your essay, you failed to consider the HUMANISTIC elements of the novel, the dynamic flux between innocence and pathos. You did not adequately deal with the work's central themes: the tyranny of blind hypocrisy, the visionary eloquence of silence. You fell short of a full appreciation of the essential and ultimate value of compassion.
You flunk.
POPE
boynton

from *Don't Let the Turkeys Get You Down* © 1986 by Sandra Boynton
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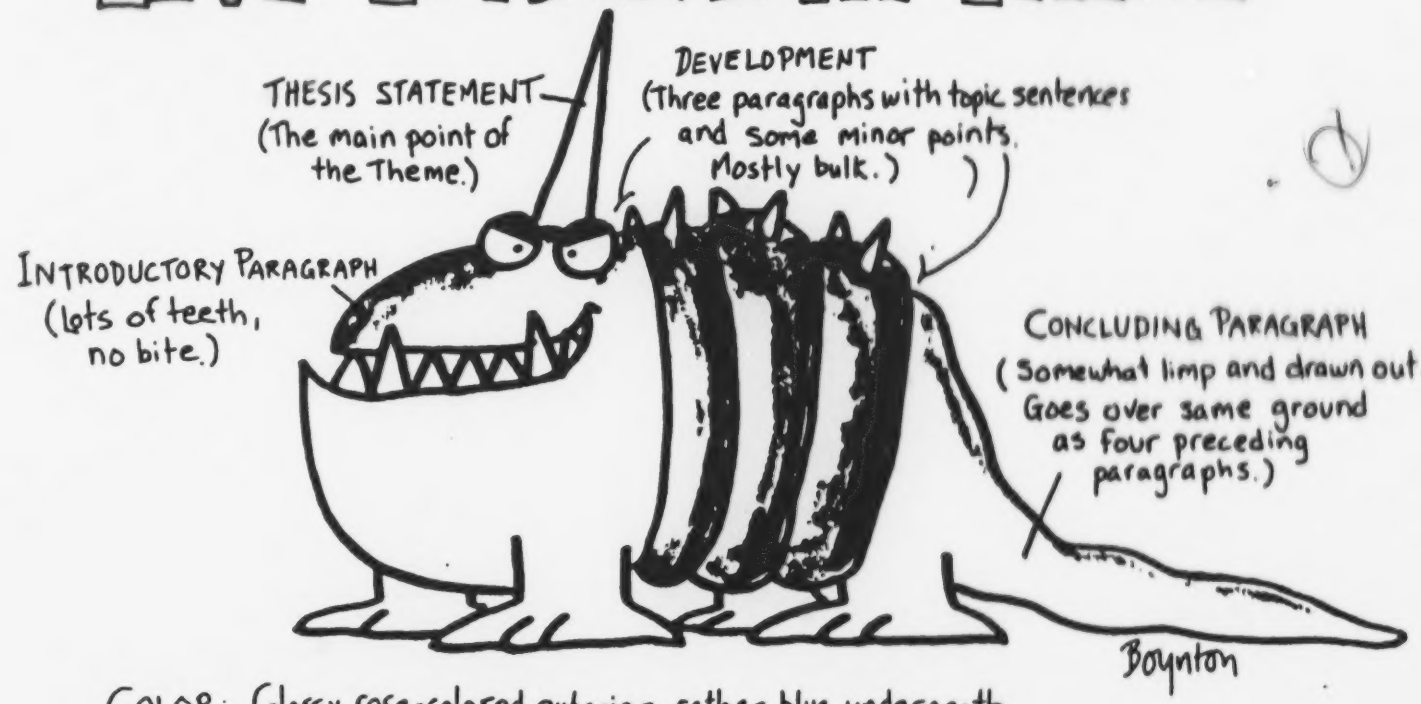
The FIVE-PARAGRAPH THEME


THESIS STATEMENT
(The main point of the Theme.)
DEVELOPMENT
(Three paragraphs with topic sentences and some minor points. Mostly bulk.)
INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH
(lots of teeth, no bite.)
CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH
(Somewhat limp and drawn out. Goes over same ground as four preceding paragraphs.)
Boynton

COLOR: Glossy rose-colored exterior, rather blue underneath. Occasional theme has a blend, resulting in purple passages.

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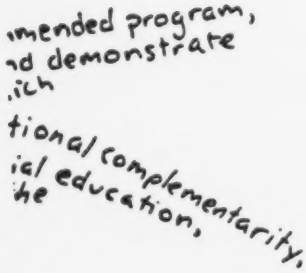
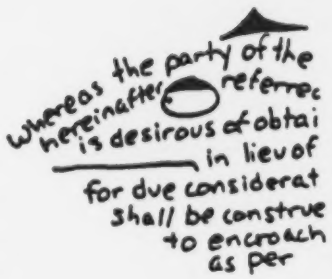
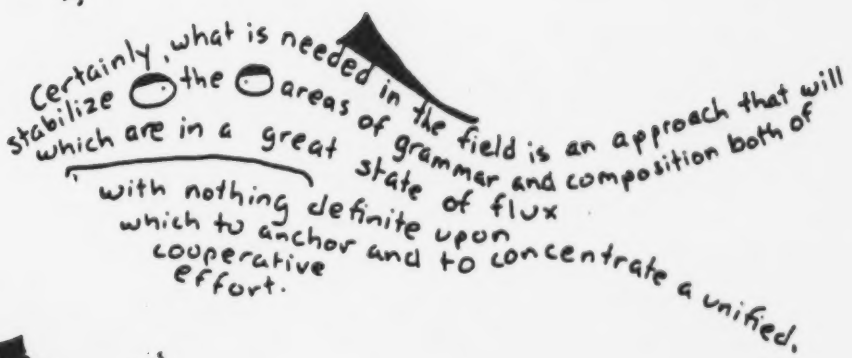
Boynton/Cook Publishers
presents

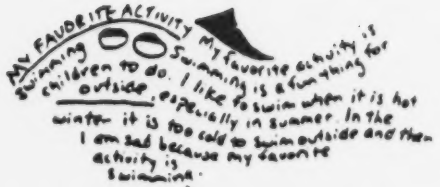
A SCHOOL OF ENGFISH ("PUFFERS")

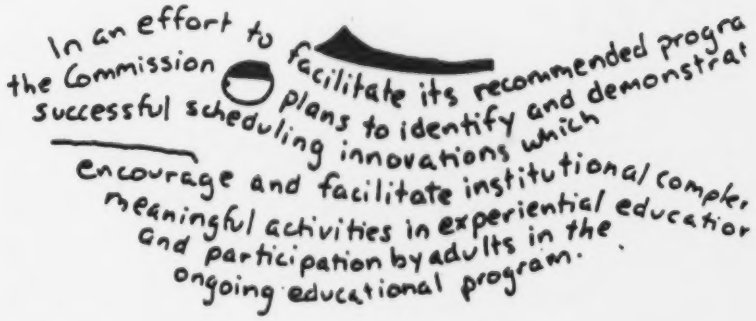
family *Tetraodontidae* Linguisticum*

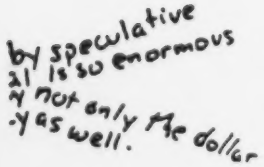





Certainly, what is needed in the field is an approach that will
stabilize the areas of grammar and composition both of
which are in a great state of flux
with nothing definite upon
which to anchor and to concentrate a unified,
cooperative
effort.


MY FAUDRITE ACTIVITY
My favorite activity is
swimming
Swimming is a fun thing for
children to do. I like to swim when it is hot
outside, especially in summer. In the
winter it is too cold to swim outside and then
I am sad because my favorite
activity is
swimming.


In an effort to facilitate its recommended progra
the Commission plans to identify and demonstrat
successful scheduling innovations which
encourage and facilitate institutional comple
meaningful activities in experiential educatio
and participation by adults in the
ongoing educational program.



*TETRAODONTIDAE "Any of numerous, chiefly marine fishes which can distend themselves to a globular form and float belly upward on the surface . . . most species of which are highly poisonous because of a powerful gastrointestinal irritant contained especially in the skin and viscera" Webster's Third New International Dictionary

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THE QUALITIES OF GOOD WRITING

1. MEANING

There must be content in an effective piece of writing. It must all add up to something. This is the most important element in good writing, but although it must be listed first it is often discovered last through the process of writing.

2. AUTHORITY

Good writing is filled with specific, accurate, honest information. The reader is persuaded through authoritative information that the writer knows the subject.

3. VOICE

Good writing is marked by an individual voice. The writer's voice may be the most significant element in distinguishing memorabel writing from good writing.

4. DEVELOPMENT

The writer satisfies the reader's hunger for information. The beginning writer almost always overestimates the reader's hunger for language and underestimates the reader's hunger for information.

5. DESIGN

A good piece of writing is elegant in the mathematical sense. It has form, structure, order, focus; coherence. It gives the reader a sense of completeness.

6. CLARITY

Good writing is marked by a simplicity which is appropriate to the subject. The writer has searched for and found the right word, the effective verb, the clarifying phrase. The writer has removed the writer so that the reader sees through the writer's style to the subject, which is clarified and simplified.

It is my belief that these qualities are the same for poetry and fiction as well as non-fiction.

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Interest Inventory, F

(Adapted from AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TEACHING OF WRITING by Stepehn and Susan Judy)

This activity is intended to help you develop lists of possible writing topics. The assignment asks that you tell a story about some situation, incident, relationship, event which had an impact on you and which changed you or taught you something you didn't know.

EARLY CHILDHOOD: Things you did when you were younger. Friends. Family. Things you did that scared the daylights out of grownups. Holidays. Dissappointments. Being Ill. Being happy. What happened and what did you learn?

PEOPLE: Friends, enemies, rivals, unforgettable characters, relatives, people who frightened you, people who supported you. What happened and what you learn?

FOND MEMORIES: Moments you'd like to relive. Why? What happened and what did you learn?

NOT-SO-FOND MEMORIES: Never again. Why? What happened and what did it teach you?

ARGUMENTS, QUARRELS, FIGHTS. What happened and what did you learn?

FIRSTS: First love, first adventure, first experience with death, first day at school. What happened and what did you learn?

SCHOOL: Classes. Sports. Teacher(s). Adventures. Problems. What happened and what did you learn?

LANDMARKS: Each of us has a number of landmarks or turning points in his or her life. Moments of truth. Crucial decisions. Making the righ or wrong choice. Meeting the right or wrong person. What happeed and what did you learn?

After you have finished jotting down ideas in each category, run through the list a second time. Place a check or asterick by each topic that especially interests you or that you think might interest your classmates. These will be especially good topics for writing.

You might also consider some the suggestions below. These are a bit more specific. Use the same criteria as above: What happened and what did you learn?

1. An experience in your life when you were the center of attention--the star, the hero, a winner.

2. An incident in your life when you felt failure, disaapointment, or embarrassement.

3. A tragic event in your life or an incident that caused you sadnes or pain.

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(5)

4. An experience or incident which caused you to feel angry, hostile, or alienated.

5. Something you did which you were sorry for later.

6. A positive relationship with someone--another person your age, a teacher, an importan adult, a lover, your best friend, etc.

7. A relationship in which you felt hurt, betrayed, mislead, or undermined.

8. A time when you had to do something that went against your grain, that required you to do something you really didn't want to do.

These topics invite first person narrative, but you can, if you wish, write in other modes. For example: write your experience in the form of a letter--to your parents, to a friend, to an unborn child, a movie star, an imaginary being, a person who lived in the past etc. Or write a fictionalized account of your experience, turning it into a short story that happned to somebody else. Write about your experience from the point of view of someone else who was there at the time: your friend, a parent, a teacher, your brother or sister, an enemy.

These are just prompts. You can use them or choose your own topics. When you have looked over this list, choose any three topics (or pick your own) and write a short paragraph on each of the three.

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Interest Inventory

A time that you felt truly happy.

Something that promised happiness but actually brought something else.

A time you realized something important about yourself.

A time when you made an important decision.

A time when you realized what other people thought about you.

A time you felt good about yourself

A time you felt badly about yourself.

A time when you wished you were someone else.

A time you felt a sense of accomplishment.

A time you overcame a problem, obstacle or handicap.

A time when you felt self-conscious or worried about what others thought of you.

Your first day at school.

An incident from your childhood or adolescence that has had a great impact on you.

An important day in your life.

An incident when you were the center of attention, either favorable or unfavorable.

A time when you felt failure, anger or disappointment.

A time when you learned to stand up for yourself and assert yourself.

Your first date and what you learned about yourself.

An experience that made you realize you had become an adult and had to take responsibility for yourself and your decisions.

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II

If you have trouble finding something to write about, here are some ideas that might help you get started or that you could choose as a topic:

1. Have you ever had what you thought was a profound insight into yourself—a moment of revelation or self-discovery? If so, tell about it and what effect it had on you.
2. Has anything ever happened to you which was so powerful that it shaped your values and thought-processes from that moment on?
3. Write an account of the most exciting experience of your life.
4. Describe a supernatural experience you have had or imagined and tell about the effect it had on you.
5. Write an essay describing your own town/city. What did it feel like to live there, grow-up? What are the people like? What is the tone and feel of the place?
6. Have you ever known or been associated with someone whom you believed was an eccentric? If so, describe the person and your relationship with him/her.
7. Have you ever known a "natural"—someone who could do things so instinctively and gracefully that it seemed as if he/she was born to do it? What was your relationship to that person? How did he/she turn out? What did you learn?
8. Using your own experience, write an essay on encounter(s) with the opposite sex.
9. Write a detailed account of your experience with a natural phenomenon—a storm, a fire, a flood, an earthquake, etc.
10. When you want to withdraw from reality, what's your favorite fantasy or method of escape?
11. Have you run away, quit school, dropped out from life? If so, write about it and the effect it had on you.
12. Have you ever found yourself or anyone you know in any of the following situations: have you ever stolen anything, been in any kind of trouble with the police, been either to trial or reform school or jail, killed anyone or seen anyone else killed, run away from home, been hooked on "hard drugs," been involved in prostitution, been part of any kind of organized crime or syndicate, been forced to live in squalid conditions? If so, describe what happened and what effect it had on you.
13. Have you ever been in a pressure situation where you knew everyone was counting on you to come through? Describe the situation, your response, and what occurred.
14. Have you ever been in a dangerous situation—if so, how did it turn out?
15. Have you ever been in a situation where you stood around and watched a terrible event or incident and wanted to do something about it but didn't (or couldn't)? Tell about it. How do you feel now that it's all over?
16. Describe an accident in which you were involved or in which you lost a close friend or relative.
17. Have you ever attended a funeral? What were your reactions? Describe the funeral and the circumstances surrounding it, and explain what effect it had on you.
18. Have you ever witnessed the death of a close friend or relative? Describe what it was like and what your reactions were at the time.
19. Have you ever been in a situation where you thought you were surely going to die? Write about it, and describe what you felt.
20. Have you ever worked in an environment where you were frequently exposed to death? If so, describe your experiences and what reactions you had.

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